

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

Position Statement # 46

THE PROVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists has ongoing concerns about the mental health of asylum seekers. Asylum seekers, who come to Australia without personal documents, and who are detained for long periods, and those asylum seekers living in the community, may be without status and with little access to necessary supports and services.

While there has been a reduction in the number of detainees on the mainland and while the needs of children in detention may be better understood, the situation remains critical. Many asylum seekers have suffered persecution and sometimes torture in their countries of origin. They have suffered the stress of separation from family and familiar surroundings. Some have had to survive stressful and dangerous situations as part of their journey to Australia. Epidemiological studies in Australia and New Zealand and in other countries have revealed high levels of psychosocial morbidity in these populations.

In 1996 the World Health Organization, in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published a manual on the mental health of refugees. The introduction to the manual commences: "The plight of refugees has been well documented. Their need for food, shelter and protection is widely recognised. Concern for refugees' mental health, however, has too long been neglected."

The College, in recognition of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), takes the following position:

- All asylum seekers, both those detained and those granted temporary release into the community, should be given full access to mental health services.
- Because the College has particular concerns about the detention of children and for their subsequent emotional development and for the effects of detention upon the functioning of their families, it recommends that further epidemiological studies of this population should be carried out.
- The College in collaboration of the bi-national governments, will promote research into the mental health and the mental health needs of asylum seekers.

References:

Mental Health of Refugees, World Health Organisation 1996.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations. 1948.

Declaration of the Rights of the Child, United Nations. 1959.

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